

AN APOLOGY FOR THE NERVES.

CONSIDERED as white threads, efferent or afferent, belonging either to the cerebro-spinal or sympathetic system, the Nerves require, so far as I am aware, no apology. An apology for the Glands, or the Tendons, or the Medulla Oblongata would be just as much to the purpose. We know that between Dogmatism and Final Causes men fall to the ground; and that Paley has, in his Natural Theology, felt it polite to offer something like an apology for cork - trees, for which he could find no ginger - beer bottles. But if the reader expects any of the crudities of physiology in this paper he will be disappointed pretty certainly he does not expect any, but he must be a very small reader if his experience has not taught him that he must constantly submit to be informed of unnecessary things. It is part of the established economy of the essay to exclude, with flourishes of phrase, what no human being would ever suppose was going to be taken in.

The Nerves, then, for our present purpose, are "as one should say," the Nerves! If, as scientific men assure us, there is, without Nerve, no Thought (this deviation from the rule just laid down is more apparent than real, and if it were real, is only the felicitous exception which illuminates the rule), we can hardly have too much of the Nerves, unless we of Thought can have too much. Perhaps it may maliciously be said that we can, and that something depends upon the quality. No doubt; but we can also have too little. Taken absolutely, Thought is a good thing, and I appeal to

common experience to declare if an excess of a good thing is Nature 's rule? On the contrary, it is so decidedly her exception that a proverb, of that defiant tone which is usual in proverbs which apply to exceptions, has been made on purpose to include the accident when it does happen to happen. Yet there is such a prejudice against the Nerves that even the Muscles have been preferred to them, and that, too, in a connection the most unlikely.

No human being has yet pretended to think with his Muscles, or feel with his muscles. Who ever heard of the aspiration of a biceps? And yet we have been told of Muscular Christians, never of Nervous Christians. It is true the phrase Muscular Christianity has been repudiated by Mr. Kingsley, and very properly; but not, as I conceive, on sufficiently broad grounds. A Christian must, like other people, have muscles, macerate him as you will; nor is it easy to conceive him without bones. But I appeal to physiologists whether the Sympathetic Nervous System is not reckoned a great channel of emotion? (this is another felicitous and illuminating exception, admitted because a solitary exception is always held in suspicion). The philosophic physiologist is welcome to suggest that the real final synthesis of nature defeats all such distinctions — we can some of us see where that drives him to — but, in the meantime, a nervous Christian is a far more natural combination than a muscular one.

The truth, however, is, that the Nerves are the objects of systematic enmity and depreciation among mankind at large. Fat, however it may excite complaint in the fat person, is not, I believe, an object of enmity, except in an omnibus or in some position

where it occupies an unusual portion of the planetary space. Prophetic denunciations against such as be fat in Zion are on record; none against such as be nervous. Yet the fat man is tolerated, loved, at worst laughed at while the nervous man is not only laughed at, he is disliked. But is it Fat that has been the chief benefactor of the human race? Was it a fat man that invented printing? Was it a fat man that discovered the circulation of the blood? Was George Stephenson fat? Were the martyrs fat men? Heliogabalus was, but was Antoninus? Julius Cæsar, though for his own selfish ends he preferred fat men about his person, was he fat himself? Was Hampden a fat man? Was Milton? Was Cromwell? Was William III? No; it was George IV. who was the fat man and he built the fat pavilion at Brighton. Charles James Fox was fat; but he gambled. Falstaff was fat; but he was not a respectable character. Hamlet, again, was fat; but he believed in ghosts and was a very undecided young man. The fattest man of modern times is a distinguished undertaker - he may make good coffins, but I am not a judge of coffins. On the other hand, is Mr. Tennyson fat? Is Mr. John Stuart Mill fat? Is Mr. Browning fat? Is Mr. Gladstone fat? No; the nation would not trust its income with a fat man; it knows better. The only fat financier I ever heard of was Mr. Hudson the railway king. Thus, it is with nervous men that we trust our money, and it is from nervous men that we expect all that makes money worth having. Or if this statement should be too wide, let it be met by contradiction - there are plenty of contradictory people in the world — and the other side have too long had it all their own way - - have too long been permitted to treat the Nervous as not only miserable in themselves but the causes of misery in others.

Part of this results from sheer error in classification. It was with extreme indignation that I once read "Dr. Trotter (of Bath) on the Nervous Temperament" - a book lent to me by a friend, who supposed me to be, as a nervous man, both wretched and a cause of wretchedness. In Dr. Trotter I found an elaborate discussion of — Indigestion! His idea of a nervous person was, I found, a person who had "the wind;" who had a poor appetite; who had ignominious symptoms not to be particularized; who suffered from "borborrigmi." And his prescriptions were such beggarly elements as calcined magnesia gentian exercise occupation; and "the warm gums." I returned the book with disgust, assuring my friend that, however nervous I might be, I never had "the wind;" knew nothing of "borborrigmi;" ate like a trooper; walked ten miles a day; and had ample "occupation." "To this hour I find people who "understand" - ah, how people do "understand " things! — that I am "nervous, " suppose that what they call "nervousness " is a sort of disease. They recommend rhubarb, or peppermint drops, or more exercise, or pale ale. The fact is they do not understand vivacity of sensation. They think it is a complaint, they localize it in the regions under or below the waistband; and prescribe to the "nervous " just as a penguin or a porpoise might prescribe to a darting swallow or a leaping salmon.

Thus, the nervous suffer in popular estimation because they are confounded with the dyspeptic, and, it may be added, with the hysterical. There is a complaint, or manifestation, or something, which in the days of Pamela and Joseph Andrews was known as the megrims, or the doldrums, or the vapours; it was a fine madam 's common excuse for not being seen, or for neglecting a duty, and it

was supposed to be cured by "Hungary water," for which the modern succedaneum is red lavender. I found all the symptoms of the "megrims" described in Dr. Trotter 's book as symptoms of the nervous temperament. In the name of all the nervous I indignantly repel the slander; that is just the way of the world — it never will discriminate. Let hysterics speak for themselves, we, the real honest "nervous" ladies and gentlemen, do not have "a difficulty in swallowing," and, most distinctly, do not have "St. Vitus 's dance," which is described by the infamous Trotter as part of the ordinary diagnosis of our temperament! I speak both in sorrow and in anger, but without surprise; for have not many of us, comrades in nervousness, been asked, "What makes you so nervous? You should take tonics!" when we were no more "nervous" in that sense than the jubilant shrimp at sunset, or the lark in the happy agitation of his matin song.

The truth is, the vulgar phlegmatic do not love to see others lively and brisk. A creature with only a few sides - say two, an inside and an outside- is naturally jealous of another with a hundred facets, or is at least puzzled by it. So, a crocodile, which takes fifteen minutes to turn round, might fancy a kitten chasing its own tail mad or diseased. True, as we all know, or as the attendants at many places of public entertainment will tell us if we ask, the phlegmatic vulgar are particularly fond of watching machinery in motion, anything that "goes of itself " is a passion with them. But then there is here no room for comparison or jealousy. The phlegmatic man knows that he might stop a steam - bobbin; that, in any case, he can do things the bobbin. cannot do, and that somebody could make another bobbin. But he cannot repress the disturbing mobility of

the nervous man; he may impute borborrigmi, and recommend potass or cardamoms, or even "the warm gums; " but he could not have given Elizabeth Barrett Browning in charge for reminding him of a fire - fly, or stopped Douglas Jerrold like a steam - bobbin. Thank heavens, we have yet our Magna Charta, our Bill of Rights, our liberty of the subject! *Sunt certi denique fines* - - there are limits, and it galls him.

One thing remains - he can confound nervousness with indigestion, and make it odious by maladive associations innumerable. It is high time to write this Apology, and disclaim the whole, from Indescribable Agony, and Incapacity for Business, to the end of the alphabet. We nervous folk have no agony, and are not incapable. Our Nerves are not disease, they are capacity; we have as much right to wonder at your lethargy as you at our vivacity.

Nervous people, again, are constantly confounded with ill - tempered people Now, the one essential condition of genuine ill - temper is stupidity. It is the fool, and the fool only, he who cannot quickly distinguish between accident and design, and readily trace effects to causes, that is angry without cause, oi for more than a minute beyond cause. Now, your nervous man is not often a fool - how should he be? — and is rarely absurd in his anger. It is true he may often be tempted to express his disgust at the ineptitudes of others, but what then? a sensitive creature,

More sensible than are the horns of cockled snails, (is that correct?) must have some means of protecting itself. There are limits to human endurance, and who will have the boldness to fix them? Job

was patient, but "did Job e 'er lose a barrel of such ale? " When the fire has been let out, and the door left unshut, and the letter put into the wrong box, and the sheet put damp on the bed for the seven times seventieth time; when "gentle dullness, " glorying in its shame, has had my right cheek and my left, is the common privilege of speech to be denied me? No, and if my speech is pungent, it is a mercy to gentle dullness, as well as a relief to me. In Homer even the wounded god may complain; is the right of complaint refused to me, because I happen to understand the use of words? How is gentle dullness to know its differentia unless the nervous people howl when hit, and use appropriate and convincing language? The displeased surprise which the sensitive involuntarily manifest at the insensibility of the insensible is a beneficent provision for the Education of the Human Race. This is a great topic, and worthy of extensive treatment. The average human being, he who is always speaking opprobriously of the Nerves, is distinguished by three characteristics:

1. He never knows when a thing is going to happen.
2. He never knows when a thing is happening.
3. He never remembers a thing when it has happened.

These melancholy features, which are, in truth, the brand of inferiority, he turns to a boast. It is the function of the nervous, a function not free from pain, to worry him into proper sensibility. If he knew his place, and his obligations, he would sing hymns in praise of his benefactors:

Who taught me when there was 'a draught,

And showed me perils fore and aft,
And frowned when I, untimely, laughed?
The Nervous!

Who told me when the glass would rise
Or fall, and with their prophecies
Or recollections, made me wise?
The Nervous!

Who heard a crash before it fell,
And knew things were not going well,
And would some warning story tell
The Nervous!

Who, when I was a pachyderm,
By many a proper, piercing term,
Thinned my coarse skin, so hard and firm?
The Nervous!

The difference between the nervous and those who depreciate them is not, however, to be expressed by such a figure as that of a difference in the thickness of the skin. Compared with the phlegmatic vulgar the nervous have antennae — they have a sixth sense — a second sight! They "see as from a tower the end of all," when others see only fog. They are the Jessie Browns of every Lucknow.* They are the Hugin and Mugin of Odin's ears. They possess all the fairies' gifts that the unselfish need care for. They carry the turquoise that turns yellow at the approach of a lie; and, to make an end of raptures, they have their inconveniences, and

very often get their light narrow wheels knocked about by the abounding heavy broad wheels of life. But their revenges compensate them. When Count D 'Orsay, in his filmily - built chaise, struck off the wheel of a stupid, stolid brewer 's dray that obstinately blocked the path, he called it the triumph of mind over matter. Such is the triumph of the nervous element over the phlegmatic element in human affairs. And, if it sometimes gets the worst of it, what then? "You young rascal," said the old gentleman to the rash little boy in the street, "if that cab had run over you where would you have been then?" and the boy answered, "Up behind, a - takin 'of his number!" Just so; when vulgar brute force runs over Nerve, where is Nerve immediately? Why, "Up behind, a - takin 'of his number!" It is a glorious mission.

All men despise, or think they despise, or pretend to despise, cowards. And — this is another misrepresentation — with cowards the nervous are perpetually confounded. Now let us waive all distinctions — which, indeed, can never be made final — between moral and physical courage, and it will certainly not be found that the bravest men are the least nervous. The greatest of the Napiers was an exquisitely nervous man. The late Rev. F. W. Robertson of Brighton may be said to have died of a fine nervous system but he had all the instincts and characteristics of a soldier, and sacrificed himself to his father 's wish in entering the church instead of the army. The list of illustrative instances might be much extended; but it is unnecessary. Without pushing beyond the truth, and looking candidly round the whole subject, we must all of us see that it is absurd to suppose the highest forms of any fine quality exhibited by the lower organizations. The very essence of being "nervous" is

apprehensiveness, or being quick to apprehend things. This may minister to fearfulness, but it is not fear. The hawk is not afraid of his prey because he sees it afar off, nor the savage of his enemy because he hears the tramp of his advance miles away in the desert. — But a nervous writer, using similes like these on a simple subject, in a playful vein, is afraid of making the subject absurd, and stops short!

It may be taken for granted by phlegmatic people that the apprehensiveness of the high nervous temperament is far greater than it appears, or than it can be intelligibly represented to be. We all know the famous Turner anecdote. "Mr. Turner, I never saw blues and reds like yours in the sky!" "No, ma 'am; but don 't you wish you could?" Now, in reality, no human being need wish to change places with another - it may be my mistake, but I do not believe any human being ever does, or did, or will wish to relinquish his identity no, not on the rack. But that the "nerves " see "blues and reds " which others do not see; that the difference between moderate nerve and much nerve is the difference between the apprehensiveness of a babe and the apprehensiveness of a grown person is as certain as that twice three are six. In reality the old schoolboy story of "Eyes and No - Eyes " ought to be called Nerves and No - Nerves; although an image borrowed from the sense of sight may help us to apprehend the difference between an organization like that of the stout tradesman next door, and De Quincey or Hartley Coleridge. I have often wondered how short - sighted men are affected by female beauty. How do they feel in a ball - room for instance? Necessarily short sight must miss seeing loveliness at the farther end of the

room; while ordinary sight might have the whole current of his life changed by it. How ridiculous, one might here say, is our moral criticism of each other, unless we regard it as give - and - take, tit - for - tat — not that my wrongness is lessened by your wrongness, you know, or that moral distinctions are obliterated, but that in what may be called the courtesies of ethics, the mote must remember the beam.

I do not at all know whether human conditions are equally balanced, nor even whether they are "pretty equally" balanced or not. It is often asserted, but nobody knows anything about it. But in mere quantity of sensation, the nervous people would probably claim to have the best of it. What, in the pleasures of sense? Yes, certainly, says our nervous friend, a fig for your pleasures of sense! What is "sense?" Do you mean to tell me that the man who could "die of a rose in aromatic pain" does not get more delight out of "sense" than a horn-handed clown? more even at given hours, to say nothing of memory and hope; the echo, the refraction, the resonance, the reduplications of joy?

.... Let spirit star the dome
Of flesh, that flesh may miss no peak!

Do you mean to tell me that if Nerves sees the sun before he rises and after he sets, as well as all the time he is above the horizon, he does not get more pleasure out of the sun? Yes, says No - Nerves, I do mean to say that; he has discounted his pleasure, and his memory is regret. And, ah, how I can plague him! I can bang doors, and stump about over his head till he maddens! I can spoil all his

pleasures by slipping in little sly drops — one drop to a cup is enough! - of poison that others would not taste. And I know that the shifting winds, and the creeping clouds, the hang of a curl, the delay of a minute, the suspicion that some one is in pain, a knock at the door, a cat on the tiles, a mere film or phantasm of a smile or a frown, can make him uncomfortable? — Ah, says Nerves, you know all that, do you? But you do not know enough. This hyperapprehensiveness of mine is far greater than you fancy. You would shrink into nothing, collapse, *zusammen fahren* if you knew it all. You think I am irritable sometimes? In the scientific sense always, but in the base sense not so often

What 's done you partly may compute,
But never what 's resisted;

and if I were to let you see how much I discern of cause for irritation, you would discern how much I forbear. But life would be impossible to us both if I were to make disclosures. My friend, I not only know that I am surrounded by Things and Persons as you do; I have in addition an incessant sixth sense of Things and Persons, of what is past, present, and to come. You live in the world, No - Nerves. I live in the world, and in a refracting atmosphere of the world as well. Which is the better man of the two? I don't know. Which is the happier? I don't care.

For this style of answer may be quoted at least the authority of Confucius. Some one asked him how many stars there were in the sky?

"I don 't know," said he, "I mind things near me."

The questioner resumed,

"Then how many hairs are there in the cat's back?"

"I don't care," said the philosopher.

This is the quip - heroic - omitted by Touchstone in his well - known enumeration. But, to deal more civilly with the matter. An elderly lady once asked me how I thought a person would feel who was sure of going to heaven. In a long and very eloquent speech, I told her my views. To my surprise, she was not comforted; on the contrary, she began to cry, saying,

"Ah, then, I shall never go to heaven, for I never felt a bit like that!"

But in five minutes I had convinced her that she did feel like that. I simply altered the phraseology of my description, and she recognized the picture at once —she had felt just what I described. The moral is obvious. Let no person who happens to read anything here written of the joys of nervousness go a-crying and say, "I never felt like that!" — a little explanation might set all to rights. Very likely you have been talking prose all your life without knowing it. All I say is, do not let us have any abuse of the Nerves. Do not confound nervousness with the megrims, or the doldrums, or any other complaint. Do not confound it with cowardice or ill-temper. And, when you come into practical relations with it in daily life, put it upon its defence as seldom as you can. It never forgets -

and if it is a decent sort of nervousness it will reward you some day for not driving it into anything more than general and remote apologies like the present.

--

*I am told for the thousandth time that this story is not true. But what business is that of mine? I roll the responsibility back upon the originator — why should we doubt a gentleman's word?

"Gentleman, indeed! " says a voice — "it was a penny a - liner! " But surely a man may tell the truth at a penny a line - he is far more likely to grow florid if you offer him a guinea a line!

MATTHEW BROWNE.

will be disappointed all reader if harmed of unnecessary ch ho